

Story Child

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

I remember the story child as well as I remember the Abandonment. Now, almost a generation later, I can't quite say what she looked like. But I know what she taught me, and how hard it was to learn.

* * * *

The day she arrived, the noise was fierce. People were moaning, crying out in their delirium. And the cafeteria was too cold. The chill from the floor-to-ceiling windows that lined the eastern wall seemed to cover me, even when I worked with patients in the far back corner of the room. I thought that the heat from their skin would warm me; they were all burning with fever, faces flushed or too pale, their hands shaking with weakness. We had had so many unexplained fevers, unknown diseases, and lingering illnesses in the past two years that I often wondered which would give up first, the germs or the people. I knew that I would continue until I dropped.

"Michael," Arlene asked as I applied the patch thermometer beneath her tongue, "I'm going to die, aren't I?"

I looked at her. She had been pretty once, two or three years ago, before all this started. Now her skin was drawn and ashen, her cheekbones too prominent, and her eyes almost too big for her head. I had a soft spot for Arlene; she was one of the few people who had been kind to me before the Abandonment, when I had been the only young doctor in the East End clinic, rather than the only doctor in town.

I slid my hands down her throat, checking her lymph nodes. No swelling. No mucus on her tonsils, no evidence of infection anywhere. I knew that her blood tests would be normal.

"I don't know, Arlene," I said. "I'm going to do my damndest to make sure you don't."

But my damndest didn't count for much anymore. The high-school cafeteria was filled with sick people, and more waited outside in the hall. Most of these people had lost all of their families and friends either to the disappearance or the diseases that rippled through the community like waves against the Lake Superior shoreline. We would get one sickness cured -- or stopped -- or it would simply end on its own -- but it would go away. A week later another would start. I worked with a small team: four R.N.s who had worked at the hospital, one L.P.N., and Lucy, who had just graduated from medical school a month before this all began. Lucy was asleep upstairs in the teacher's lounge. She would take over for me when I couldn't stand any longer.

"Michael." Arlene grabbed my arm. Her fingers felt hard and hot against my wrist. "I think I'm delirious."

Her eyes had focused on something over my shoulder. I turned. A small skimmer floated above the tables. A young girl, who was no more than ten, sat cross-legged on the saucer-like surface. No one spoke, but everyone looked at her. Perhaps, like Arlene, they all thought they saw a fever dream. Skimmers were energy-wasting children's toys. Before he died of the previous fever, Jim, the mechanic, had pulled the power sources from every skimmer we could find for use in more practical machinery.

But no one was looking at the skimmer. We were all looking at the child.

We had heard of children still living toward the south, strange tales of psi powers, mental disease, and violence, but I had never believed them. Even if children had made it through the Abandonment, they didn't have the constitutions to survive the diseases.

I took a step forward. "Hello," I said.

A gasp rose through the room, and I could guess the thought on every mind, the thought unspoken: *She is real, then. Maybe I am not as sick as I thought. Or maybe, The doctor is sick, too.* I shook that idea away. I had no time to be sick. If I died, the community would die. It was that simple.

The skimmer floated down to me, making the wind-like humming sound I thought I had forgotten. My daughter had a skimmer. We took it out in Hammond Park the day before she disappeared -- the day before the world disappeared -- and she giggled as she floated over the trees. That hum was a counterpoint to her laughter. The memory made me ache.

The girl watched me as the skimmer landed on the floor between us. She unfolded herself from the plastic surface with the awkward grace of an almost-woman. I had forgotten that too. And I had forgotten the way a child's face seemed only half-formed: hers foretold a serious, patrician future, with high cheekbones and wide eyes. Model pretty, in the world that had gone.

"You're tired," she said. Her voice was soft, wispy, with soprano edges on what would become contralto.

I let the rich voice soothe me. The muscles in my back ached, and my temples throbbed. My feet were almost numb in their shoes and my hands were shaking with exhaustion. I had been tired for two years.

"Who are you?" I asked, but the girl had already wandered away from me, to Mr. McRenly, who shuddered under a blanket on one of our few cots. The child took his hand, covered it with her own, and said, "Let me tell you a story."

I started to go to her, to tell her not to disturb the sick people, when Sarah, one of the nurses, passed me. "I'll take care of her. Arlene needs you."

I turned. Arlene looked as if she were about to pass out. I eased her back onto the table -- wishing, still wishing that we had beds. But most of those were in the hospital, and we had left that first, feeling that the germs were growing there like invisible warriors. We emptied the clinics next, then the hotels, and now we were down to our last big place, the high school.

I pulled the patch from Arlene's mouth, barely having to glance at the old-fashioned digital numbers. 104.5 Fahrenheit. All we had were the old thermometers, and the high non-metric number seemed even more frightening than a Celsius reading. 104.5. It flashed through my dreams.

Her fever hadn't been that high a few minutes ago -- I could have sworn it. Something had caused the rise. Something had changed.

I glanced over at the child.

She was still holding Mr. McRenly's hand. Sarah stood beside the table, a troubled frown on her face.

I gave Arlene two ancient aspirin, forced her to swallow them, and wrapped a blanket tightly around her. There wasn't much else I could do. Not until we pinpointed a cause.

Sarah looked up at me. I thought I saw tears glinting in her eyes. With a slight movement of her head, she indicated that I should come over there.

I did. And as I did, people reached out to me, touching my sleeve or my arm, in a silent plea for help. I ignored them. The little girl stood up as I approached, and went to the next table. I stopped in front of Mr. McRenly. Sarah had already placed a patch thermometer beneath his tongue, but I could tell her without seeing it that his temperature would be normal. Sweat had broken out all over his body, and his color had returned. I touched his forehead. It was damp, but cool.

"What did she do?" I asked.

"She told him a story," Sarah said.

The room seemed to have grown colder. I walked over to the next table. The girl held the hand of Marita Fisher.

"And on that morning," the girl was saying, "she woke up to find everyone gone."

The Abandonment. The child was telling about the Abandonment. Marita stirred, as if to stop the story, but the girl continued.

"She walked through the streets and it looked as if everyone had just vanished. Cars had gone off the road. Coffee cups stood half-full in the restaurants, the grills on, food burning. She must have put out half a dozen small fires...."

A dizziness swept through me that I couldn't control. I lurched forward, grabbed at a table and missed, nearly falling on the floor. Sarah grabbed me; she must have hurried over when she saw me stumble.

"Enough," she said. "You're going upstairs. Lucy can take over for you."

I wanted to protest, but the dizziness wasn't going away. Lucy needed her rest too, and she'd only had a few hours. I didn't know what I would do if she got sick.

Sarah placed her arm around the middle of my back. "You have to walk alone," she said. "You don't want people to think something is wrong with you."

She was right. All they had was an ever-so-faint hope that I could do something. I shook Sarah away, and took one measured step, then another. I could make it upstairs. But the child --

"I'll take care of the child," Sarah said.

I frowned. I hadn't realized that I had spoken aloud. The exhaustion seeped deeper into my bones, and I wished that the child had never talked to me. The walk to the stairs seemed interminable, and the climb tired me. I stopped on the first landing and looked. The line wound down the hall to the gym. Most people sat as they waited, leaning on the cold glass and the brick walls. It seemed as if the entire town were here, or what was left of it. Maybe this was the last fever, and it would take all of us, and it would take all of us to the place where the others had disappeared on that empty morning two years ago.

I sighed and climbed the rest of the way up. They needed Lucy if they didn't have me. Someone making an effort. Someone trying.

The door to the teacher's lounge was open. Lucy was asleep on the couch, her long dark hair pulled free of its combs and sprawled along the armrest. One bare foot peeked out from under the blanket. Even in sleep, there were shadows under her eyes.

I sat down beside her and smoothed the soft hair from her face. Her skin temperature felt normal to the touch. As my hand moved, the tension in her body grew. I knew that, even though her eyes were still closed, she was awake.

"How bad?" she asked.

"Line all the way to the gym."

She sighed and sat up. Two years ago, when I met her, she had looked like a young girl. Her eyes had

had that innocent look of someone who thought life continued forever. Now crow's feet lined the corners, and the innocent look had been replaced by a resigned fear. I wanted to take her in my arms and soothe her, but I didn't have the time. Or the energy.

"You're exhausted," she said. She stood up and eased me down, pulling off my shoes and wrapping the blanket around me. Her hand lingered a moment too long on my forehead, and I wondered what she felt. Too much heat? Or the cold that had joined my tiredness?

"Lucy, the child!" I sat up, but Lucy was gone. The light looked different. I must have slept. Sitting so fast increased my dizziness, and I didn't lie back so much as fall back. This time, I felt sleep take me, and as I slipped under, I realized that I was sick, too. The fever had finally found me.

It took me into dreams of viruses chasing healthy blood cells through my system, of med-school lectures about the inevitability of disease, of Lucy crying with frustration, of children with psi powers and pregnant women. I hadn't seen a pregnant woman since the Abandonment. No growing life, only fading life. Faces paraded across my consciousness, people who had died, who were dying. And I was helpless, paralyzed, trapped in my own dying body, unable to care for them, with no one to care for me.

A hand held mine. A cool hand, a too-small hand. Its grip was dry and gentle.

"Let me tell you a story."

I recognized the voice. The rich voice with soprano edges. The contralto with childlike tones. I couldn't move to say yes or no, and I didn't want to pull away.

"It's the story of a man born in the southern part of Wisconsin, to a farm family. He worked hard, this little boy, baling hay, milking cows, gardening, canning, but always finding time to read. Sometimes he thought -- "

that my family didn't care about me. They only cared about my hands, and my back, my ability to lift and carry, to help for the price of room and board. I missed weeks of school, and struggled with my studies, often hurrying to the bus while I still smelled of cows and dung. No one cared for me, no one could get near me --

"until college, when he finally escaped. An understanding counselor and a scholarship bought him freedom, and he never turned around, working summers in Madison instead of returning home. It seemed as if the family didn't miss him. No one even bothered to tell him -- "

that my father was ill. No one had bothered to help him either. I came home on a lark to find him dying of something that could have been stopped. Strange time to realize you love someone. Strange time to find your calling. After the funeral, I went back and enrolled in pre-med, and worked --

"and worked and worked. He found time to court his wife, a slender, beautiful woman -- a musician -- with a wide capacity for understanding. He found time for his daughter, even with med school and internships and residencies. He was busy all the time, hardly sleeping, always working, always giving, but finally getting something back -- "

until that June morning when I woke up to an empty bed. I called for Susan and Sharon. I ran through the house, searching. Breakfast was on the table, the eggs half-eaten. The cars were in the garage. No one, absolutely no one was on the street. In the next few days, I realize --

"that they weren't the only ones who had left him. Almost everyone had left. There were scientific explanations about a new weapon, and mystical ones about people transferring into another dimension,

but no one really knew what had happened. Some of the survivors were calling it the Rapture, saying that God had finally come and taken the faithful away. But Lucy, one of the few people he still knew, called it the Abandonment. And he felt abandoned, as unloved now as he ever had been. Perhaps more because -- "

they didn't take me with them. They didn't love me enough to take me along. I wondered what I had done or hadn't done, working harder and harder, still losing people faster than I could help them.

"What he never realized was that people lived their own lives. It wasn't what he had done or hadn't done, but what had been given him. He was strong, a survivor, able to cope with almost anything. He is here because he is needed. And he meets that need."

Something warm and wet slid into my eye, burning behind the lid. I opened my eyes, expecting to see the child, but I was alone. And soaked. The blanket was wet, I was wet, sweat poured down my face. The child had healed me. Her touch had healed me as it had healed Mr. McRenly.

I staggered up, wiped my face and walked to the door. Downstairs, everything was quiet -- as quiet as it had been when my family disappeared. Lucy. I had to find Lucy. I raced down the stairs, seeing no one in the hall, no line in the cafeteria. The tile was cold against my bare feet. The tables in the cafeteria were clear, no blankets, no bodies. No skimmer rested on the floor. This time, they had left and cleaned up after themselves.

"Lucy!" I called. If she had left, and I was completely alone, I didn't know what I would do. I could only survive so much. "Lucy!"

She came out of the kitchen, a towel in one hand. In the back of the room, I finally saw Sarah, wiping the table down.

"You look better," Lucy said.

I sat down, feeling ridiculous for my panic. I hadn't had a panic attack like that for nearly a year. "Where is everyone?"

"Home."

I glanced around the cafeteria. One of the other nurses was mopping the floor. "Where is she?"

Lucy shook her head. "She took her skimmer and left before I even noticed she was gone. I have some people out looking for her...."

I nodded. The exhaustion was back, but this time it was exhaustion born of relief. This fever had passed. We could have a few days of rest. A few days of hope. A few days to be free.

* * * *

A few days turned into a few weeks. No one got ill. Everyone went about his or her business. We actually had time to disinfect the hospital. Lucy and I cleaned and cleaned. People helped us make new mattresses for the beds. We found extra blankets. I organized a large painting party, and we painted the surgical rooms, the examination rooms, and the first-floor rooms. We finally had a real facility with passable equipment.

And no one got sick. I went into my office every day and read, trying to discover what the child had done to save us all. I read books on healing, on touch, on psychic powers, and found nothing. I found myself staring at my scuffed office walls so long that I finally decided to paint them, too. Reading was

getting me nowhere. I had no answers.

I had just moved the furniture into the center of the room when someone knocked on my door.

It was Lucy. "We found her."

I didn't have to ask who the "her" was. I set down my paintbrush. "Where is she?"

"Downstairs," Lucy said. "She's very ill."

We hurried down the poorly-lit corridors. Our footsteps echoed in the silence. The hospital's emptiness still bothered me. This was one place that should have people, always busy, with voices calling names and instructions over the PA system. Life would begin here, end here, and be renewed here. And now there was nothing.

Except a sick little girl downstairs.

We took the stairs that led to the emergency area. They had her in the clinic room. Sarah was monitoring her vital signs when I came in the door.

The child lay on the cot, her eyes closed. I hadn't remembered what she looked like, only her voice. The voice was silent, and she was emaciated. Her skin was gray. An occasional shudder ran through her. I didn't have to see her chart to know that she was dying.

I washed my hands, checked her chart and the patch thermometer. The feeling had returned -- that thick, all-pervasive helplessness. And the exhaustion.

"Where was she found?" I asked.

"Between here and Ashland. She had set her skimmer down on the side of the road. She could have been there for days, we don't know," Sarah said.

Lucy and I looked at each other. Her thoughts were the same as mine. Hopeless. It was all hopeless.

But in the next few hours, we did everything. We gave her aspirin, some precious antibiotics, checked for infection, ran blood tests and urine tests. No matter what we did, she seemed to get worse.

Finally, I walked away to take a rest. Perhaps, with distance, I would get some perspective. I worked even harder on her than I had worked with anyone else. I felt as if I owed her, as if we owed her, for the revival of our small community. Somehow I had to keep her alive.

Lucy handed me a cup of coffee and sat down beside me. The cup felt hot against my cold fingers. "I don't know what to do," I said.

Lucy nodded. "We have to do something. People here believe in her. If they find out that she's sick..."

I looked at Lucy. She didn't know what she had said. People believe in her. All this time I had looked in the wrong books, studied the wrong reasons. I had been looking for a medical reason, a physical reason for the change, but the child had given us nothing physical. She had spoken to our psyches, our selves, the wounded children inside us who had been abandoned by their families, their friends, and their peers. Children, on a fundamental level, who believed that they weren't worth anything and had no reason for living. She saw us all, and by seeing us, let us know that we still mattered.

He was strong, a survivor, able to cope with almost anything.

He is here because he is needed.

She had given me a realization, a new way to look at what had happened to us two years before. The event was not an abandonment, nor was it a rapture in which the best were taken. It was a saving. A kind of Darwinesque experiment of survival of the fittest.

I set my coffee down and wandered back to the girl.

"What are you doing?" Lucy asked.

"I'm trying something."

I pulled up a chair beside the child and took her hand. She hadn't moved. If anything, she looked thinner, even more ashen. Her skin was burning to the touch. "I want to tell you a story," I said. My heart was pounding. I had no psi powers. I didn't know her history. I took a deep breath. "A little girl came to our town on a skimmer. She touched people and told them stories and healed hurts that they had been carrying for years. Then she got sick, and they wanted to help her, but they didn't know how."

I stopped. Her breathing was still ragged, her skin still hot. I shook my head, remembering. It wasn't the history that had been important. It had been the perspective. But she had known where my hurts were. I could only guess at hers.

I stared at her for a long time. When she had come into the cafeteria, she had seemed self-possessed, a tiny Buddha on her skimmer. She had let none of us in and reached to all of us. I knew that feeling, of giving, giving, giving, and never receiving, going on internal energy and not replenishing the stock. She was healing others, just as I had been, and taking nothing for herself.

"I can't tell stories," I said. I clutched her hand against my chest, leaned forward and brushed her hair away from her overheated forehead. "But I can tell you this. I know how tired you are, and how you need to help, and how it feels as if you are all alone, trying to save the world. You save the world better than I do. You reach in and touch people's souls. You have a gift for healing. You don't have to carry it alone. We're here and we want to help."

The hand in mine stirred. She blinked and her eyes opened. There was no quick break, no sweat as there had been when she talked with me. The expression on her face was cool and withdrawn.

"No one has ever helped me before." Only her mouth moved when she spoke. Her gaze remained flat, challenging.

I squeezed her hand. "No one has ever realized that you needed help before."

She nodded and closed her eyes. She seemed very still. I had killed her. Somehow, I had done the exact wrong thing. I shook as I took her pulse. It was there, but faint.

Lucy grabbed a patch thermometer and put it in the child's mouth. She didn't move, didn't blink. Her breathing seemed shallow. I stroked her cheek, wishing that she would open her eyes. But she didn't. Not even when Lucy removed the patch.

"102.6," Lucy said.

It took a minute for that to register. 102.6 Fahrenheit. The child's temperature had gone down.

* * * *

I wish I could say that ended it and we all lived happily ever after. But a week after she began to heal, the story child disappeared on her skimmer. Diseases came back to our town, but never again ravaged the entire community. Lucy and I eventually married, and on our wedding night found ourselves presiding over the first birth the Northern Great Lakes had seen in nearly four years.

Once, though, almost a decade later, I heard from a Southerner of a woman who told stories. She spoke to no one except those who needed her help. But the Southerner said the woman seemed to have an inner joy -- and that the stories she told were always stories of hope.